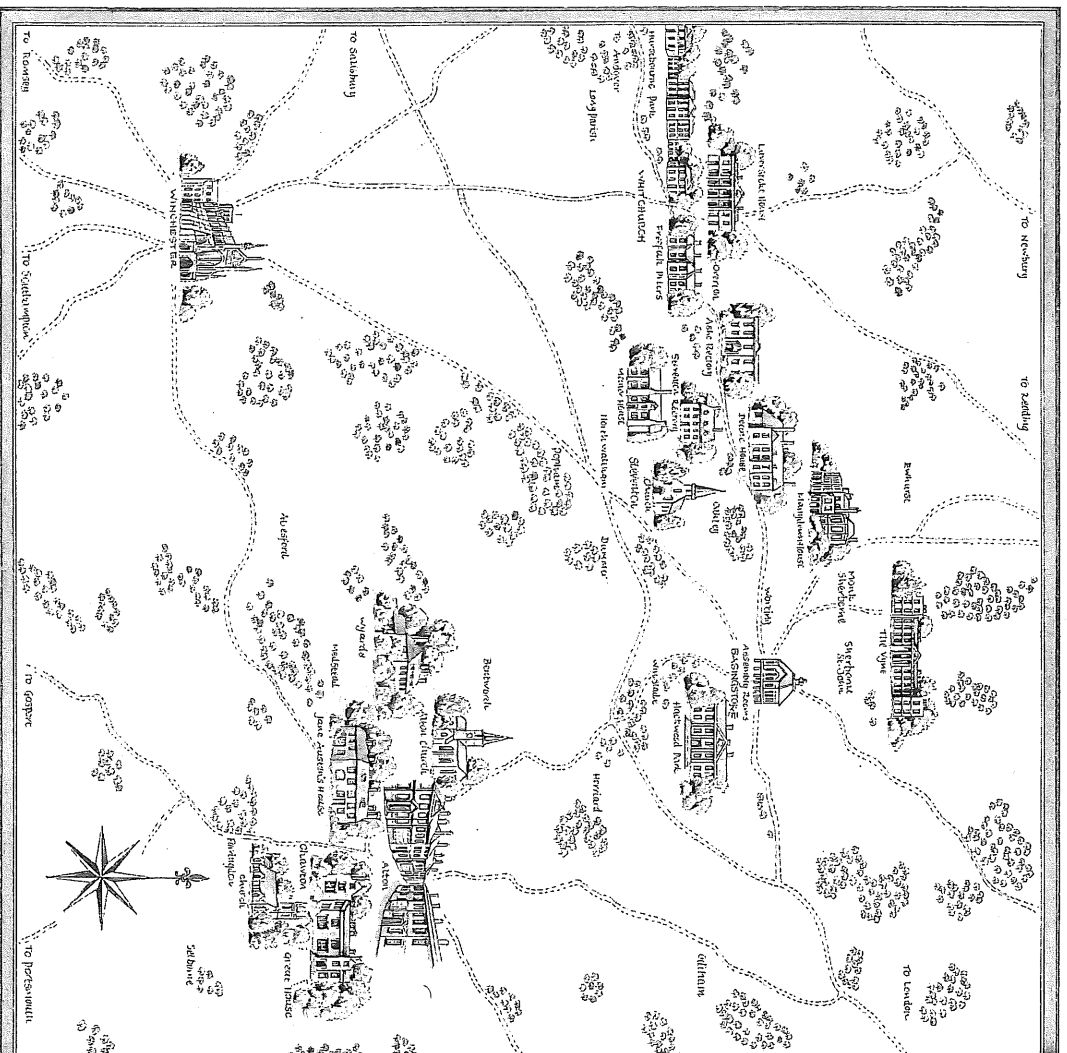


Jane Austen and Marriage

Hazel Jones



Jane Austen's Hampshire

Continuum UK, The Tower Building, 11 York Road, London SE1 7NX
Continuum US, 80 Maiden Lane, Suite 704, New York, NY 10038

www.continuumbooks.com

Copyright © Hazel Jones 2009

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission from the publishers.

First published 2009

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 84725 218 0

Typeset by Pindar NZ, Auckland, New Zealand

Printed and bound by MPG Books Ltd, Cornwall, Great Britain

Contents

Acknowledgements

Introduction

- 1 The Advantage of Choice
- 2 The Power of Refusal
- 3 An Acquaintance Formed in A Public Place
- 4 White Satin and Lace Veils
- 5 Where N Takes M, For Better, For Worse
- 6 Wedding Journeys
- 7 Scandal and Gossip
- 8 A Contract of Mutual Agreeableness
- 9 Domestic Happiness Overthrown
- 10 The Simple Regimen of Separate Rooms
- 11 The Years of Danger
- 12 An Old Maid At Last

Notes

Bibliography

Index



JANE AUSTEN AND MARRIAGE

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the help and advice given by many institutions and individuals in the course of my research. These include Helen Scott, Sarah Parry, Jacqui Grainger and Corrine Saint at Chawton House Library; the staff at the British Library, Hampshire Record Office, Bath Fashion Museum and Bath Record Office; the Revd Michael Kenning, Rector of Steventon Church; Jessamy Sykes at Lambeth Palace Library; Camilla Seymour at Bonhams; Christopher MacDonald at Asprey Jewellers, London; Miss Helen Leftoy; Mr Tom Carpenter and Louise West of the Jane Austen Memorial Trust and Dr T. K. Brandreth for the use of his extensive library.

I also thank my critical readers Charlotte Reilly, Lorna Blewitt and Dr Pat Ensum for their constructive comments and all of my Jane Austen students for their tireless encouragement, over the past year in particular. Lorna Blewitt also created the map of Jane Austen's Hampshire featured on the frontispiece.

Ben Hayes, Eva Osborne, Sarah Patel, Pen Whitson and Alice Eddowes at Hambleton Continuum, Jane Gadd, Kim Pillay and Dina Cloete at Pindar NZ deserve thanks for guiding me through the publication process.

For permission to quote from various publications and annual reports, I am grateful to The Jane Austen Society and to Dr Katherine Beaumont for permitting the use of material from the Austen Papers. In addition, the British Library, Hampshire Record Office and Chawton House Library have allowed me to use references from a number of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts and archives. The idiosyncratic spelling, grammar and punctuation found in extracts from primary sources have been retained for the sake of contemporary colour and flavour, with errors indicated only where the sense is compromised.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to Deirdre Le Faye, for answering my queries with promptitude and kindness and providing accurate transcripts of the Austen Papers. Without her definitive biography, *Jane Austen, A Family Record*, the invaluable *A Chronology of Jane Austen* and her collection of *Jane Austen's Letters*, I could not have written this book.

Finally, I am indebted to my dear husband David, for his practical help and considerable technical skill, for driving me to Hampshire, London and Bath on demand and for the hours he has spent delving into his collection of the *Gentleman's Magazine*.

Every effort has been made to contact all holders of copyright. The publisher will be happy to rectify in future editions any errors or omissions brought to its attention.

Introduction

Any book about marriage in Jane Austen's time is sure to feature contradictions and complexities and this one is no exception. These were years of great change and great resistance to change, creating a state of flux in that trickiest of personal relationships, marriage. While the final pages of every Austen novel celebrate the very best kind of union, based on compatibility, affection and respect, alliances contracted as the result of other inducements provide significant counterpoints. The level of society with which the author was most familiar, comprising large landowners, the armed services, the professions and the lower gentry, increasingly viewed the companionate marriage as the ideal and conjugal happiness as a legitimate aim, yet marriages of convenience were common. At the top of the social scale, some aristocratic families still arranged marriages for money and political power, yet love matches were not unknown. Not all titled or wealthy parents manoeuvred their children into mercenary alliances; not all gentry families allowed their sons and daughters to marry where they chose. The differences in attitude to marriage between these discrete ranks became blurred as one certainty emerged: that marriages based on love and esteem were more likely to endure the test of time than those contracted for material gain. Foreign visitors who recorded their impressions of English society at this time were unanimous in their verdict, that young men and women were granted more freedom than their continental counterparts to choose marriage partners and that friendship within marriage, first cultivated over a long period of courtship, was lasting rather than fleeting. This was not the whole story. Eldest sons who inherited family acres and fortunes were more often than not subject to parental sanction in their choice of wife, and fathers of General Tilney's persuasion expected to command an influence over the selection

of all their children's marriage partners. Parental veto remained a powerful weapon where money and land were at stake. Daughters in all ranks of society were in a particularly vulnerable position and the pressures on them to marry were of a different order, because their present and future economic security lay in male hands – fathers', brothers', husbands'. Sir Thomas Bertram's liberal-minded expectation that both of his sons would find compatible wives is counterbalanced by his lack of sympathy for the women under his care: his endorsement of Maria's contemptible match; his anger and incomprehension when Fanny refuses to accept a rich man whom she does not love. The problems facing single women, with money or without it, are clearly delineated in Jane Austen's novels, while her letters and the correspondence of other women recognize the mental and physical dangers encountered by married women in real life.

Conduct literature proliferated in Jane Austen's lifetime, in response to the anxieties and uncertainties created by the problem of finding the right mate. Sons and daughters allowed to exercise a degree of choice over whom they married needed advice on how to assess character, how to behave in the assembly rooms springing up in every notable town in England, how to attract the opposite sex, how to make or refuse a proposal, and – finally – how to fulfil their roles as husbands and, more especially, wives. From fox-hunting parsons to aristocratic ladies, every conduct writer had opinions on manners and morals, etiquette and dress, accomplishments and education, and they promoted them unstintingly. The Reverends Gregory, Blair, Fordyce and Gisborne, to mention only a few among the many Church of England clergymen who advised men and women on their duties to God, their spouses and themselves, tended to adopt a conservative approach, unequivocal enough to be delivered from the pulpit and popular enough to run to many editions. The main thrust of their argument was that God had made men stronger than women, both intellectually and physically and that this superiority gave them a divine right of authority which women must not seek to challenge. Equality, they cautioned, was neither possible nor desirable; female interests were best served by the cultivation of refined helplessness, guaranteed to stimulate the male protective urge and soften the male heart. Women were put on this earth to please men, after all, and happiness in

marriage could only come through an unquestioning acceptance of male dominance.

Attitudes towards wives, however, were changing fast as a direct result of affective marriages, occasioning widespread concern about the balance of power within the household. As late as the 1730s, a man's right to apply 'reasonable correction' to his wife was still upheld by the courts; in 1782, when a prominent judge voiced his support for wife-beating, provided the stick used was no thicker than a man's thumb, there was a general outcry. Yet wives promised to obey their husbands in the marriage service and relinquished their limited autonomy, as well as their legal identities and any money they might possess, on achieving the elevated status of married women. Two radical writers, Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays, attacked the system as it stood and those who supported it, arguing for female rationality rather than physical and mental frailty; for vocational female education in place of superficial accomplishments acquired merely to please future husbands; for conjugal companionship rather than wifely subservience. Inevitably, they attracted a barrage of criticism from the traditionalists, targeting their unconventional lives as well as their ideas. Catherine Macaulay, a staunch promoter of female education, adopted a less combative tone, holding that husbands had the right to expect obedience from their wives, but that they should in their turn treat those wives as their best friends. Reactionary pronouncements on women's marital roles did not emanate exclusively from the male camp; Hannah More and a number of other female conduct writers supported the belief that women should defer to men in all things and accept male protection with gratitude. Some recognized the double standards operating within marriage, but counselled acceptance of the status quo as the safest option. Those who focused on the less controversial area of dress and deportment gave advice geared specifically to catching husbands, and admitted as much.

Men and women were exposed to the same contradictory messages, but that does not mean that they took any notice of them. That conduct books were so prolific points to the fact that existing behaviour was already causing concern and if Jane Austen's characters and plots reflected real people and real situations, as contemporary critics seemed to think they

did, then conduct literature was taken for the most part with a pinch of salt. The *British Critic* review of *Persuasion*, published in 1818, attacked the questionable moral of the story, which appeared to be that where marriage was concerned, the young could avoid certain and prolonged misery by listening to their own hearts rather than to those older and wiser than themselves. The satirical final sentence of *Northanger Abbey* emphasises the author's ambivalent response to the dubious wisdom peddled by the exponents of both traditional and liberal moral values. It is left to the reader to decide whether parental tyranny or filial disobedience is to be applauded, since everyone gets what they wished for in the end. Jane Austen herself read conduct manuals and the ways in which she used their precepts in her fiction reveal her opinion of them. She hated Hannah More's overt didactic moralising and altered an early composition, *Catharine, or The Bower*, so that the heroine's narrow-minded aunt can limit her niece's reading matter to Hugh Blair's *Sermons* and More's *Coelebs In Search of A Wife*, an account of a fastidious bachelor's successful quest to find an unrealistically virtuous mate. Mr Collins spouts Fordyce, Mary Bennet has a quotable moral maxim for every eventuality. Her heroines possess no more than an allowable number of virtues and although Fanny Price is less flawed than most, it is not moral rectitude that saves her from Henry Crawford, but her love for Edmund. Jane Austen presents us with fallible women, who learn from their mistakes, because this is how experience is gained. They are individuals and respond to whatever happens to them with intelligence and common sense. Elizabeth Bennet's method of dealing with the vagaries of life and love is not Fanny Price's, or Anne Elliot's, or indeed any of the other heroines' ways. Their marriages will certainly not turn them into exemplary spouses either – it is difficult to imagine Lizzy or Emma as silently submissive wives, Darcy and Mr Knightley marry them for entirely different qualities – what is more important is that they possess an acute self-knowledge and appreciate the moral and intellectual qualities of their partners. Jane Austen allows her heroines a year at least to make keen character assessments and shows that matches based on physical attraction alone are doomed to failure, yet she questions the assumption that alliances formed after only a short acquaintance were similarly disadvantaged. The Crofts achieve lasting happiness in marriage

after only weeks in each other's company. Austen novels highlight the exceptions and reflect the contradictions in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century approaches to marriage. Conduct writers could not expect one size to fit all.

From the 1790s to the end of her life in 1817, Jane Austen became an increasingly critical observer of the marriages which came to her notice. She recognized that affection, friendship and respect were fundamental elements of any workable relationship, but discovered for herself that a man who combined the ability to inspire the necessary degree of love and esteem with the essential qualification of a good income was not easily come by. Financial inducements alone were not enough to tempt her into matrimony – she turned down one wealthy suitor in the full knowledge that, at the age of twenty-six and with eligible men in scarce supply, she might never receive another proposal of marriage. Although she would probably not have gone as far as Mary Wollstonecraft in claiming that the marital state was little more than legal prostitution for those women who traded their bodies for economic security, she did indicate in her novels and letters that such sacrifices were made. No Jane Austen heroine marries for money: affection is always part of the equation – yet the recognition that romance alone would neither keep body and soul together nor sustain marital accord is a crucial element underpinning all of her writing.

In real life and in the novels, the psychological preparedness of those entering the marriage state interested Jane Austen far more than the external show of the wedding itself. She left it to others to detail the satin and lace, the feathers and pearls, the cakes and carriages and a selection of their accounts are included in this study, together with contemporary experiences of courtship and marriage, childbearing and birth control, adultery and elopement, the trials and comforts of the single life. The marital histories of Jane Austen's brothers and sisters-in-law, her neighbours, friends and acquaintances and those unfortunates whose scandalous alliances came to her notice through the newspapers, provide the background against which her minor and major characters make their assessments and choices and, consequently, the beds they have to lie in.

The Advantage of Choice

A single man in possession of a good fortune was not in want of a wife, unless he chose to be. Inviting a woman to dance or proposing marriage, was, as Henry Tilney points out to Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, the man's privilege, but in his choice of a wife he had to think beyond his initial inclinations and the superficial obligations of the dance floor. Few men could act completely independently, unless they were very rich, very foolish, or had no family to consider. Money, character and connections were crucial concerns for both parties, as Jane Austen and other writers stressed in novels, letters, journals and the conduct literature of the day. Popular sentimental fiction may have glamorized love matches, with or without parental sanction, but not many men or women could afford to ignore the absolute necessity of an adequate income. 'Love in a cottage?' asks one unconvinced realist. 'Give me indifference and a coach and six.'¹ If it was morally indefensible to marry solely for money, it made little sense to marry without it and in reality, many choices were made with an eye to monetary gain *and* emotional happiness. Affection was desirable, but if a good income made the heart beat a little faster, well, that was understandable.

The scarcity value of men in Jane Austen's lifetime, together with women's dependence on husbands for status and financial security, gave eligible bachelors the power to behave like connoisseurs. Men with the means to marry occupied an enviable position and a Fitzwilliam Darcy, with a sizeable yearly income and a large estate, could thwart the expectations of young ladies and their mothers in assembly rooms up and down the country, by refusing to make himself available as a dancing or a marriage partner. Men with independent fortunes or lucrative professions, naval captains back on land with prize money in their pockets, clergymen

with comfortable livings, gentlemen with private incomes, all possessed the wherewithal to raise or to dash female hopes. The younger sons of peers and gentlemen with small estates and expensive habits might consider themselves restricted in their exercise of choice, but it was a self-imposed constraint, based on procuring the income necessary to maintain an accustomed lifestyle, to keep a stable of hunters or finance the glittering social round in London and Bath. In the early nineteenth century, one out of every four younger sons remained a lifelong bachelor. If they married at all, they tended to do so in their early to mid-thirties, after they had worked their way far enough up their professional ladders and perhaps attracted a woman with money. An eldest son, with his property and income guaranteed, usually married between the ages of twenty-seven and twenty-nine. Clergymen might have to wait for ten to twenty years for a good living to become vacant, so marriage for them was postponed until their thirties and forties. Professional men in the law and medicine were slightly better off; in 1800, they were marrying at twenty-eight, on average.

Unscrupulous men who decided that their incomes were not sufficient to achieve their aspirations had no consideration beyond marrying for money and used the advantage of choice to the full. There were enough of them in evidence for conduct book writers to issue warnings to unsuspecting women:

When they chance to think of MARRIAGE, it is with feelings of the most perfect indifference; for as in this step a mercenary view is the great incentive, should one Lady refuse their Proposal, they coolly turn round, and seek for another who may be weak enough to accept it . . . an inquiry into her pecuniary circumstances is made, as an indispensable preliminary to an union, which if they find below their expectations, they quickly banish all thoughts of making her A WIFE. . . .²

How to identify a man intent on gaining money through an expedient alliance, with scant concern for the woman in the case, is a question debated at length by Elizabeth Bennet and her Aunt Gardiner. When George Wickham turns on his charm for Miss King with £10,000, Elizabeth claims to consider it natural that he should attempt to gain a degree of independence by acquiring a wife with money, especially when he possessed so little

of it himself. Mrs Gardiner, with less reason to excuse his sudden interest in a girl with little to recommend her other than her recent fortune, views his actions as mercenary; but how could a woman determine the difference between self-interest and prudence? Where did sound judgement end and cupidity begin, particularly when money was at the root of both? Miss King and Miss Darcy are both saved from Wickham's gold-digging ambitions by their families, but some women in the real world were not so fortunate. A former neighbour of the Austens, the desperately plain but moneyed Mary Russell, fell prey to George Mifflord, a charming fortune-hunter, who pretty soon frittered away his wife's assets.³

Beleaguered heiresses of a later date might have benefited from the advice offered in a popular lovers' handbook for both sexes, published in 1809. One exemplary letter, purporting to be 'From a Gentleman to a young Lady of Superior Fortune', attempts to alert the vulnerable to the duplicity of the disingenuous: ' . . . were our circumstances reversed,' he claims, 'I should hardly take to myself the credit of doing a generous action in overlooking the consideration of wealth, and making you an unreserved tender of my hand and fortune.' The lady's reply is encouraging — she appears to swallow his assertion of disinterestedness — but at the same time circumspect: 'I must refer myself entirely to the direction of my father.'⁴ According to some moral advisers, however, inequality of wealth in itself should create no hindrance to marriage:

. . . if one of the Parties has an Independence, and loves a person who is not in affluence, there can be no reasonable objection to the Alliance, provided the affection be mutual and the CHARACTER of the less wealthy party be unblemished.⁵

In reality, such alliances were rarely greeted with unalloyed pleasure by families with money. No matter how spotless the character of the less fortunate in terms of wealth or status, suspicions of self-interest would inevitably be aroused. When the only legitimate son of General Sir Robert Sloper chose to marry the former governess to his illegitimate brothers and sisters, the marriage appeared to please no-one other than the couple themselves.⁶ Jane Austen allows Mr Weston, with money made from trade, to choose Emma's 'portionless' companion, with the blessing of his friends

and son, although in this case, the distinctions of rank are not offended. In contrast, his first marriage to an heiress had caused a family rift and brought no material benefit to himself. The headstrong Miss Churchill had determined to have him, but her extravagance proved more than his small private income could stand and she never allowed him to forget her condescension in marrying beneath her. His second match, twenty years later, provides 'the pleasantest proof of its being a great deal better to choose than to be chosen, to excite gratitude than to feel it.'⁷ A letter from Jane to Cassandra in 1800, reporting Miss Sawbridge's marriage to Mr Maxwell, told a similar tale, but one where the woman possessed the fortune. He was only a humble tutor, who stood to gain materially from the match, in terms of status and a good home. Jane concluded that Miss Sawbridge must be head over heels in love to contemplate such a penurious suitor.⁸

That the match was based on infatuation on her side and acquisitiveness on his is mildly implied here, although the motivation behind the alliance might have been less cynical, especially since Jane added that she had heard Mr Maxwell's character highly spoken of. Whatever the truth of the matter, Jane Austen leaves her novel readers in no doubt that single *women* with little money must be in want of husbands with ample fortunes, especially if they had no male relatives to support them. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne and Elinor Dashwood openly discuss the annual income necessary for a comfortable married existence: for Elinor £1,000, for Marianne, £2,000. It is not surprising that Mrs Bennet's sole aim in life is to get her daughters married off – there are five of them, all facing a narrow existence on the interest of £5,000 a year between them when their father dies. So, when Mr Bingley with his £4,000 a year settles at Netherfield Park, she sees in him an insurance policy against future privations. Contemporary readers would have understood her motives, but deprecated her determination to marry her daughters off to *any* man with a decent income, regardless of affection or compatibility. Elizabeth has a firm enough character to oppose Mrs Bennet's manoeuvrings, but her more tractable sister Jane, with a strong sense of duty and obedience to her mother's wishes, would surely have been browbeaten into accepting the only Mr Collins. Luckily for her, a richer suitor is already on the horizon.

With few opportunities for earning money, women ignored the necessity of marrying men with reasonable prospects at their peril. If a young woman hoped to avoid a penny-scraping existence, she must learn to value self-preservation above inclination. Conduct literature supplied ready-made arguments for fathers faced with reckless, love-sick daughters who had read one too many sentimental novels. One example from the early 1800s provides a list of questions aimed at dissuading a girl from accepting a young soldier's proposal:

Is his pay sufficient to maintain himself? If it be, will it be sufficient for the support of a family? Consider, there will be no opportunity for you to increase his poor income, but by such means as will be very grating for you to submit to. Be cautious of pushing yourself into ruin.⁹

In a similar vein, Mrs Gardiner warns her niece against becoming attached to George Wickham and Elizabeth accepts her sensible advice without resentment, but makes the realistic point that caution often comes a poor second when affection is part of the equation – a consideration often overlooked by the conduct books, most of which reprobed mere personal liking as a sound basis for marriage. Despite her claims to the contrary, Elizabeth is wiser than many of her gender, but the only promise she makes is to do her best to take things slowly. She promises more than Jane Austen herself was willing to when she met Tom Lefroy, the twenty-year-old nephew of the Lefroys at Ashe Parsonage. In her letters to Cassandra, covering an acquaintance of three weeks in January 1796, her partiality is plain enough for her sister to issue an Aunt-Gardiner-type warning about the dangers of ungarded behaviour.¹⁰ After the final ball at Ashe on January the 15th, his aunt and uncle had seen sufficient to unsettle them, and Tom was sent back to London. In later life, he admitted to feeling 'a boyish love'¹¹ for the twenty-year-old Jane, so presumably he would have chosen to marry her if circumstances had allowed, but with his way to make in the law and younger brothers and sisters to support, he could not marry without money. As matters stood, they were forced to part and the Hampshire Lefroys ensured that any future visits by their nephew occurred in Jane's absence, or were kept secret. Mrs Lefroy in particular blamed Tom for behaving thoughtlessly towards a young woman whom

he knew he was in no position to marry. Single men needed a fortune in order to want a wife and this particular single man became engaged to Mary Paul, the sister of a rich Wexford friend, only a year later. 'If *his* love had continued a few more years, he *might* have sought her out again – as he was *then* making enough to marry on –' wrote Caroline Austen to her brother James-Edward. Instead, 'he married an Irish lady – who certainly *had* the convenience of *money*.'¹² In fairness to Tom Lefroy, his wife's fortune only materialised on her brother's early death, several years after the marriage, but this early experience taught Jane a lesson about love and money that she never forgot.

Women were also capable of fortune-hunting and the man's advantage of choice proved no advantage at all if he lacked a knowledge of the world. Innocence in such matters serves *Northanger Abbey's* James Morland a painful lesson. As a woman with no fortune, Isabella Thorpe's initial fears are that James will fail to gain his father's consent to marry. Her assertion that he would be her only choice if she had "the command of millions" belongs in the pages of a sentimental novel. Her expectation of future wealth is apparent in her dreams of a villa in Richmond, her own carriage, a new name on her visiting cards and a dazzling display of rings on her finger. When Captain Tilney and his better financial prospects arrive on the scene, she rapidly transfers her mercenary affections to him. Edward Ferrars, too, is a victim of his own youth and inexperience – he becomes attached to Lucy Steele as a result of naïvety and lack of occupation. Lucy is determined to do better than merely economise on a small income and despite her protestation that she would be willing to suffer poverty for Edward's sake, she plans to wait however long it takes for his mother to part with a substantial sum. Elinor recognises that Lucy will give Edward up only if a better opportunity presents itself – which it does, in the shape of Edward's credulous younger brother, Robert. His vanity makes him susceptible to Lucy's flattery: 'Instead of talking of Edward, they came gradually to talk only of Robert, – a subject on which he had always more to say than on any other ...'¹³

Any green young man might have benefited from reading *The Advice of Experience to the Young of Both Sexes*, which claimed to know all about the Isabellas and Lucys of this world:

To you, my young Lords of the Creation, my advice is, not to marry too unadvisedly, for on your present choice depends your future happiness. If the lady you intend to pay your addresses to destroy her time in dress, frivolous entertainment, public spectacles, or unprofitable reading; if she be enamoured of her own person, coquettish, and love flattery; if she laugh much, and talk loud; if she prefer the street to her father's house, and her eyes glance eagerly at those of men; ... be not captivated by her beauty, but turn away ... contemplate the misery which will ensue where beauty, that perishable flower, is the only foundation on which your happiness is built.¹⁴

Male flirts exercised their advantage of choice in a different way, entertaining to themselves, less amusing for their victims. Mary Wollstonecraft recognised the extent of their power: 'There are quite as many male coquets as female, and they are far more pernicious pests to society, as their sphere of action is larger, and they are less exposed to the censure of the world.'¹⁵ Henry Crawford fits this mould perfectly. He is an accomplished flirt, having gained plenty of experience in London, practising his techniques on his sister's friends. A wife, he declares, is "Heaven's *last* best gift."¹⁶ In the meantime, he means to enjoy breaking hearts without putting himself at risk; the Miss Bertrams are attractive and gullible and fair game. His winning manners have a softening effect even on Fanny Price's resolve, and Jane Austen describes how successful the attack of a practised deceiver on *any* young woman is likely to be, no matter what conduct literature maintained to the contrary:

although there doubtless are such unconquerable young ladies of eighteen ... as are never to be persuaded into love against their judgement by all that talent, manner, attention, and flattery can do, I have no inclination to believe Fanny one of them, or to think that ... she could have escaped heart-whole from the courtship (though the courtship only of a fortnight) of such a man as Crawford, in spite of there being some previous ill-opinion of him to be overcome, had not her affection been engaged elsewhere.¹⁷

Ascertaining character was vitally important for both men and women, and for the families concerned on both sides, for, as Catherine Morland puts it, "People that marry can never part", and if they wished to, divorce and separation were prohibitively expensive options. It is to be hoped that Jane Austen's prediction of certain unhappiness for Miss Jackson and

Mr Gunthorpe was wrong, since their marriage lasted for thirty-six years, but his character – ‘He swears, drinks, is cross, jealous, selfish & Brutal’ – appears unredemable.¹⁸ When even an intelligent Lizzie Bennet could be taken in by a handsome face and assured manner, what hope was there for those of inferior penetration? Plenty of conduct manuals attempted to provide an answer and while some offered genuinely helpful advice, others were of uncertain benefit. One female moralist advised women to make a purely rational choice of marriage partner:

Comply not to give your heart before you have well weighed and advised what you are about to undertake. Let not love blind you, but make your choice with the eye of reason. . . . Consider not of riches and a high birth so much as of virtue and agreeableness.¹⁹

Choice here, of course, did not imply that women could make proposals; they could only give or withhold encouragement, but the advice given, although eminently sensible, expects rather too much in the way of cool evaluation on the part of an inexperienced young woman, in love perhaps for the first time. An even less practical approach to choosing a suitable husband was adopted by another writer who stated that physical attributes reflected the inner character:

If the man you contemplate have thick red lips, he will be simple, good-natured and easily managed. . . . If he speak quick but distinct, and walk firm and erect, he will be ambitious, active, and probably a good husband. . . . If he be what is termed a NICE MAN, he will not have dirty nails, dirty shoes, a cravat soiled, and hair like brush-wood: his stockings will be tight, his apparel dusted, and his gait not as if his limbs were at variance with his body.²⁰

At least this writer recognized that good looks had a direct bearing on female interest. Most conduct literature attempted to deny it, but Jane Austen undermined this absurd attitude with wit and common sense in her early writing and in her later fiction. In *Frederic and Elfrida*, she has the young, lovely, but far too obliging Charlotte Drummond accept the marriage proposals of two men in a single evening, one a sallow-faced, aged gentleman, whom she cannot bear to make unhappy by a refusal, the second a young, handsome fellow in a fetching blue coat, whose appearance ‘influenced Charlotte in his favour . . . she could not account

for it, but so it was.²¹ The proud Charles Adams, in *Jack and Alice*, is a self-proclaimed paragon, fully aware of his dazzling effect on women: ‘I look upon myself to be a perfect beauty – where would you see a finer figure or a more charming face?’²² Jane Austen does not ignore the seductive power of physical appeal – Emma Woodhouse is attracted by Mr Knightley’s firm, upright bearing as well as his intelligence and her feistiest heroine, Lizzie Bennet, is particularly alive to it. To Jane Bennet’s list of Mr Bingley’s qualities, her sister adds the fact that he is handsome, as every young man should be to make his character complete. Her favourable first impression of Mr Wickham is based entirely on his tangible charm and she is not immune to Darcy’s physical presence.

First impressions, however, often lead to ill-informed judgements, as Jane Austen is quick to point out. Darcy’s initial attraction for Meryton society is based on his tall, good looks and his £10,000 a year, but when his disinclination to mix becomes obvious, he is pronounced proud and disagreeable, a superficial view with which Elizabeth Bennet concurs, her pride having been dented by his rejection of her as a dancing partner. Yet during her stay at Netherfield, she might have seen a better side to his character, if she had chosen to look with an impartial eye: he writes long letters to his sister and is an articulate, thinking, reading man. On his home territory, at Pemberley, Darcy’s wider social responsibilities as a landowner and master are evidenced in his restrained taste and judicious exercise of power. Unlike Lady Catherine, he does not parade his wealth, nor seek to impress, and Elizabeth must reassess her prejudiced view of him. Her later claim that she began to fall in love with Darcy after seeing his beautiful house and grounds is no joke. By the time she accepts his second proposal, she fully comprehends his character and her own state of mind. Jane Austen allows each of her heroines about a year to assess their future husbands’ qualities; forming an attachment too precipitately invariably carried a health warning:

In the choice of a companion for life, no one will be hardy enough to deny that great circumspection, and a proper knowledge of the disposition of each party by the other, is absolutely necessary. Yet how often do we find this untended to, in the most material concern of life! Hasty matches are formed; and subsequent misery is but too often the result of them.²³

In *Love and Friendship* the idea of marriage contracted on a short acquaintance is taken to ridiculous lengths when the heroine marries a total stranger the very same night he turns up on her doorstep. Mr Collins' decision to choose Jane Bennet as his wife is made almost as fast – on the first evening of his visit to Longbourn. She is the prettiest and he is confident that he is enough of a catch to stipulate for a 'handsome' partner. The following morning, Mrs Bennet cautions him against fixing on her eldest daughter, so, while she is poking the fire, he transfers his hopes from Jane to Elizabeth. Mr Collins can now choose to marry because he has a good house and a sufficient income, but he does not consider the character of his future partner beyond the vague virtue of 'amiability'. He allows himself eleven days in which to secure his companion for life and expects to expend little energy on courtship. He will inherit the Longbourn estate; his suit, therefore, will be highly acceptable. In real life, a faster worker than Mr Collins secured a wife, fortune and all, in record time. Mrs Bland writing to Miss Heber in 1791, described the whirlwind courtship:

Pray do you know in Northamptonshire a Mr Pinckard? He has lately married a Mrs Lethieullier that lives in Portman Street, a maiden Lady, near £20,000 at her own disposal. Her friends think she had better not have had it. She talks much of his Beauty &, when he is in the street, he is taken for the Prince of Wales. They met at Margate, & that there first acquaintance, & that in about 10 days tack'd 'em together for Life.²⁴

She had fallen for his good looks, he for her £20,000. How the relationship prospered is anyone's guess, but the unequivocal assumption that an acquaintance of brief duration inevitably led to an unhappy marriage is a truth not substantiated in fiction or in life. If the couple involved were of good character, there was every chance of success. Admiral and Mrs Croft, Jane Austen's cousins Thomas and Jane Williams, reach an understanding after days rather than months in each other's company, although for the majority, any certainty of conjugal compatibility resulted from a more leisurely evaluation. A Frenchman noted with surprise in the 1780s that three English marriages out of four were based on affection, attributing this to fairly rigorous character appraisal beforehand: '... the Englishman makes more effort to get to know his bride before marriage;

she has a similar desire, but he was not at all sure about the English ideal of companionate marriage. Marrying at a later age was wise, he thought, if wives and husbands were to live always together, otherwise life would be a misery.²⁵

Women were free to exercise judgement, but they could not be initiators. Emma Woodhouse, with all her money and influence, is not allowed to invite Mr Knightley to dance, although she can tell him quite directly that she would like him to ask. By the same token, women had to wait to be asked to marry, although they might angle for the proposal. If men were reluctant, or uncertain, or inexperienced, there were ways of bringing them to the point of no return. Isabella Thorpe shamelessly angles for James Morland from the moment of their first meeting. Her 'instant' friendship with Catherine, her compliance with James' every thought, are calculated to further her aim. Augusta Hawkins, also on the *qui vive* for a husband in Bath, as she has been for several winters, knows just how to ease Mr Elton into making a proposal. His damaged pride is delightfully responsive to the 'distinguishing notice', following hard on the heels of the first introduction; the 'accidental rencontre'; the various dinner and party invitations; the lady's 'smiles and blushes', 'consciousness and agitation' and willingness to be impressed. She signals very clearly that, if asked, she will not turn him down.²⁶ For the sake of a home of her own, Charlotte Lucas makes a bid for Mr Collins as early as the Netherfield Ball, when she 'goodnaturedly' relieves Elizabeth of his tedious conversation. Charlotte is sharp enough to interpret his behaviour to her friend and predict an outcome which could work to her own advantage. Following Elizabeth's refusal, Charlotte learns that Mr Collins' sole object is to find himself an acceptable wife, and realising that she can manoeuvre him into a position where he will consider her, she lures him away from Longbourn to Lucas Lodge. She listens to his pompous pronouncements for two days and is rewarded with his proposal speech early on the third.

It was considered highly improper for a woman to fall in love before the gentleman's preference was declared, but Catherine Morland, like most of Jane Austen's heroines and plenty of women in real life, does not follow conduct-book principles. Henry cannot help but notice her attraction to him when her obvious dependence on his good opinion is so plainly,

if unconsciously, revealed. He is mature enough and sensitive enough to read all of the signs and Catherine, 'in finding him irresistible, becomes so herself. 'That a young lady should be in love, and the love of the young gentleman undeclared, is an heterodox which prudence, and even policy, must not allow', declared Samuel Richardson, and many other moralists agreed with this principle.²⁷ Any attempt to communicate interest in a man could be read as potential entrapment, the natural order overturned, man as hunted rather than hunter. Jane Austen jokingly cast herself in this predatory role, stating in a letter to her sister after a party in Bath that she had only been prevented from using all her wiles to snare one of the men there by the inconvenient fact of his having a wife and ten children.²⁸ In *Sense and Sensibility*, she has Sir John Middleton, a huntsman himself, employ the vocabulary of the chase when he accuses Marianne Dashwood of scheming to 'catch' John Willoughby, merely because she asks questions about his character. Marianne particularly objects to the expression 'setting one's cap at a man,' yet she exposes her preference for Willoughby without reserve, laying herself open to ridicule, especially when he abandons her for an heiress.

Jane Austen saw both sides of the coin. In *Pride and Prejudice* she shows that concealment could also have potentially disastrous consequences. Elizabeth, reflecting on Jane's circumspect behaviour towards Bingley, is satisfied that she will not be the object of gossip, but Charlotte makes the sensible point that if Bingley himself remains blind to Jane's affection, there will be little comfort in the rest of the world being ignorant of it also. The world, it seems, took delight in deriding disappointed hopes, which provided one strong argument in favour of discretion. Charlotte is proved right in this case, as Elizabeth later admits – Bingley gives up all hope of Jane when he is persuaded, by her too guarded behaviour, that she is indifferent. When merely dancing more than once with the same partner could appear 'particular', it is little wonder that men themselves should take care to avoid raising the expectations of single women or their families. Believing that he has paid Elizabeth enough attention to give her ideas, Darcy resolves to ignore her completely on her final day at Netherfield. Bingley is less circumspect in hiding his preference for Jane – he chooses her as a dancing partner over other women, he fails to

respond when people speak to him, but do these signs add up to love? When Bingley leaves the neighbourhood, ostensibly for good, neither Jane nor Elizabeth is entirely sure. Willoughby's total lack of concealment appears more unkind in comparison – even in public, he shows a marked preference for Marianne and acts like a committed lover.

Fishing for a marriage partner might be done by the family on either side. That marriage could be 'a manoeuvring business' was only too apparent, with the interference ranging from the cold calculation of the arranged marriage to more benevolent coercion. Jane Austen at almost thirty-three could joke about marrying the forty-five-year-old Rector of Chawton, 'whatever might be his reluctance or my own', in order to please Mrs Knight,²⁹ or speculate on the likelihood of a dead father bequeathing his four unmarried daughters to noblemen,³⁰ but the powerless sons and daughters of aristocratic families could only hope that they might find some reward for sacrificing themselves to fulfil their parents' dynastic aspirations. 'I had not the least guess about it till the day papa told me,' wrote Harriet Spencer of her arranged engagement to the Earl of Bessborough's son and heir in 1780:

I wish I could have known him a little better first, but my dear papa and mama say that it will make them the happiest of creatures, and what would I not do to see them happy . . . I have a better chance of being reasonably happy with him than with most people I know.³¹

Her sister, Georgiana, appears to have possessed a more realistic view of such matches: 'Marriage now is a necessary kind of barter, and an alliance of families; – the heart is not consulted.'³² It was common for a would-be suitor from the higher classes to bypass the woman completely and go straight to her father for permission to marry. The first she knew of any proposal was when Papa summarily brushed away all objections, insisted on compliance and packed her off to the library to give the expected answer. The ideal of the companionate marriage was far from influencing every father's dealings on the marriage market; the arranged marriage was alive and well, despite the change in attitude and century. Mamma might do her best to soothe her distraught daughter with the likelihood of love after marriage, 'and it did come' confided one fortunate victim in 1823,

‘ – but oh the sunshiny morning of youth.’³³ What made the situation even worse for this particular woman was that her elder sister had fallen desperately in love with the suitor on his previous visits. Sisterly affection must have been severely tested for some while. Eugenia Stanhope, an aristocrat herself, voiced her disapproval of such matches in her letters to a young female relative in the late 1790s, exposing the questionable assurance of love after marriage:

There is no one, you well know, holds in so much contempt the general Opinion, that Persons of good Tempers will love one another after they are married, tho’ they were indifferent before . . . I have differed with all our Family, and with all the Families of Prudence, as they call themselves, in the World, about those Marriages which are made by Parents, and in which those who are most concerned have no Business but Compliance.³⁴

Not only aristocratic families were guilty of such stratagems, as Jane Austen illustrated. The Honourable Miss Morton with her £30,000 becomes the focus of Mrs Ferras’ machinations in *Sense and Sensibility*. When Edward refuses to comply with his mother’s directive to make the heiress his wife, the younger son, Robert, is substituted, prompting Elinor to wonder wryly whether Miss Morton herself would have any say in the matter. Her brother’s reply clearly expresses the mercenary principles on which he, his wife and mother-in-law expect everyone to be operating – Miss Morton is little more than a commodity on the marriage market and now that Robert is the heir to property and a fortune, he will automatically be acceptable.

The advantage to families of a good match could be considerable – “The luck of one member of a family is luck to all.”³⁵ Isabella Thorpe, because she is beautiful, is expected to catch a man with money and provide greater opportunities for her younger sisters to find good husbands. Mrs Bennet relies on a match between Jane and Bingley for the same reason; her younger daughters will move in a higher social circle and mix with rich, eligible bachelors. Elizabeth’s marriage to Mr Darcy introduces Kitty into more edifying company and Lydia and Wickham are benefited, too, by a steady supply of money from Elizabeth’s allowance. On Darcy’s side of the equation, Georgiana gains a sister who injects a sense of fun into her

serious life. Charlotte Lucas’ brothers can breathe a sigh of relief that their sister will not be a future burden on their finances and her sisters entertain hopes of mixing in adult society sooner than they had expected. Even Fanny Price can see one definite advantage in marrying Henry Crawford – she imagines him agreeing to her sister Susan’s removal to Everingham, far from the deprivations of Portsmouth. The rest of the Price family would also benefit from Fanny’s alliance – her brother William in particular, through the Admiral’s influence over future promotion in the Navy. Examples of the wider implications of marriage choices abound – the richer Musgroves aid the poorer Hayters, Sir Thomas Bertram supports his wife’s less fortunate sisters.

Family opposition to a match could prove powerful, or ineffectual. Henry Tilney may go against his father’s orders and propose marriage to Catherine, but the Morlands will not sanction the match until the General relents. Henry’s position is an uncomfortable one – his living is in the gift of the Abbey and open defiance of his father leaves him isolated. Charles Bingley’s sisters are successful at the outset in detaching him from Jane Bennet, but their hopes for a match with Georgiana Darcy are not realised and their brother returns to Netherfield to marry his first choice. Anne Elliot suffers for eight years from her father’s cold disdain and Lady Russell’s well-meaning but rank-obsessed advice to refuse a man with uncertain prospects. Unfortunately for Lady Catherine de Bourgh, her determination to influence Darcy against Elizabeth has the opposite effect of taking him back to Hertfordshire to make a second proposal.

The proposed marriage, in 1781, between Jane Austen’s cousin Eliza Hancock and a French officer stirred up a certain amount of family panic back in England. John Woodman, a trustee of the Hancock funds, wrote anxiously to Eliza’s godfather, lamenting the Frenchman’s lack of ready funds and Mrs Hancock’s intention to ‘give up to them the sum which was settled on her for life’. Mr Woodman stated that this request had been declined by himself and the second trustee, Mrs Hancock’s brother George Austen. Mr Austen had other concerns – apart from giving up all their English friends and their country, he feared his sister and niece might turn Catholic. Given his opposition and Eliza’s propensity for independent thought, her claim that she married ‘much less from my own judgement

than that of those whose counsels & opinions I am the most bound to follow', is questionable. The advantages of the match are openly admitted in her letter to Philadelphia Walter: her husband 'literally adores' her; her circle of acquaintance is 'numerous & brilliant'; she is 'mistress of an easy fortune with the prospect of a very ample one'; although Woodman claimed that the couple were draining Mrs Hancock of every shilling she had. She signs off with a flourish, 'Countess de Feuillide'.³⁶ There is no mention anywhere of affection for her husband, and Phyllis herself, in a letter to her brother, revealed that although Eliza professed respect for the man, she did not love him.

The Austen parents themselves appear not to have stood in the way of their children's choice of marriage partners. One match in particular pleased Mrs Austen: her eldest son's choice of Mary Lloyd as his second wife, and she wrote to welcome her into the family in November 1796:

Had the Election been mine, you, my dear Mary, are the person I should have chosen for *James's Wife*, *Anna's Mother*, and *my Daughter*, being as certain, as I can be of anything in this uncertain World, that you will greatly increase & promote the happiness of each of the three... I look forwards to you as a real comfort to me in my old age... ³⁷

Following his first wife's death, James Austen had danced his way into the hearts of several Hampshire ladies, until the choice had narrowed down to two clergymen's daughters, Mary Harrison and Mary Lloyd. Why he eventually settled on the smallpox-scarred Mary Lloyd is uncertain; her fortune was small, but it did clear the debts he had accrued during his first marriage. The Lloyd family were already well-known to the Austens and Mrs Austen may have had it in mind to promote Mary's interests when she invited her to Steventon for a week in September.

Familial intervention invariably finds its way into Jane Austen's fiction: a guardian locks up his wealthy ward until she agrees to marry his eldest son; a father drops heavy hints about breakfast china and shows off his opulently furnished abbey; two titled sisters plan an alliance between their babies; a baronet holds a ball, so that his niece's rich admirer can dance with her; another one deigns to be seen with his eldest daughter's choice at Tattersall's and in the lobby of the House of Commons; one mother

sends a daughter three miles on horseback into certain rain, to ensure a lengthy recovery under the potential suitor's roof; a second bribes a son to marry an heiress and when he refuses, disinherits him; a third rewards a flannel-waistcoated suitor of thirty-seven with a young wife of nineteen; a sister employs trickery to promote her brother's advances. Sojourns with inhospitable relatives are extended, lovers are left alone in drawing rooms or sent off for long walks, invitations to dinner are issued, carriages made available or denied, character and accomplishments vaunted. The whole mechanism of choice proved far more complex than a straightforward decision to marry as soon as finances allowed and, while the man still made the final move, he might find himself either abetted or obstructed by whoever possessed the ultimate power of refusal.

The Power of Refusal

The choice made, nothing remained but to pop the question, either in person, by letter, or through an intermediary. The form of words used in face-to-face proposals was rarely recorded and although a few conduct manuals suggested various plans of campaign, there is no evidence that their efficacy was ever put to the test. Interestingly, references to men delivering proposals on bended knee, either in fictional accounts, conduct literature, or letters, are negligible;¹ surely Jane Austen would have had Mr Collins adopt this position when he makes his speech to Elizabeth, had a book on etiquette decreed that he should. It is hardly likely that he would have done so in the lane where he proposes to Charlotte Lucas. Those uncertain of their own powers of persuasion, or doubtful of a positive answer, could make an offer indirectly through a third party or by letter. The self-assured might wax lyrical on the extent of their properties and fortunes, leaving the more romantic to deliver ardent speeches, perhaps on their knees, and the less prolix to simply ask the direct question, 'Will you marry me?'

Rebecca Solly's painfully shy suitor carried out the initial courtship negotiations with her mother, who replied with a letter of encouragement dictated by her daughter. The following week the man rode over to spend a short time alone in the library with his intended, but the power of refusal or acceptance did not belong to her at this stage of the proceedings. Her mother and brothers decreed that money matters had to be decided before any definite answer could be given, despite the twenty-nine-year-old Rebecca's obvious desire to marry:

... I believed myself as free when I left the library that day as when I entered it—however I will now acknowledge ... my meditations were not very old maidish and I certainly wished that money at least might not conclude the Affair.²

Neither his request nor her answer are available, but we can guess at the embarrassment of such an encounter for both sides and the nail-biting uncertainty they must have suffered while the financial bargaining dragged on for another fortnight. When all was finally settled to everyone's satisfaction, the lovers were recognized as engaged and permitted to kiss for the first time.

William Chute of The Vyne, one of James Austen's hunting companions, showed a greater sense of strategic timing when he proposed to Eliza Smith in June 1793. Eliza's diary covering the period of courtship is remarkably economical on detail: after several 'Mr Chute to dinner' entries in early June, 'Sophia conversation', 'Answer' and 'Final decision' appear on the 10th, 12th and 13th; then the very next day the Smith family left London for a prolonged holiday in Weymouth and Lyme, Mr Chute joining them in the final week of July. He danced attendance throughout August and September, turning up most evenings and striding in at odd times during the day, his restlessness most likely a symptom of his impatience to get back home to his hounds and foxes at the start of the hunting season. It was probably no coincidence that he chose to secure a wife during the early summer months although, during September, he managed to squeeze in a day's shooting on the Smiths' estate in the country. The marriage settlement was signed on October the 14th and the wedding took place on the 15th, after which Mrs Chute's diary records her husband's hunting pursuits on an almost daily basis throughout the rest of the year and into the next.³

'Allow me to say that you are the only person in whose Society I can find Happiness and to whose example and care I could entrust the welfare of my children,' wrote Sir Edward Knatchbull in his proposal letter to Jane Austen's niece, Fanny Knight, in 1820, adding that she could be certain of his 'most unremitting and constant attention' if she became his wife. He had been a widower for six years and perhaps his decision to marry again came about through necessity – he had inherited his father's property and his seat in Parliament in 1819 and now needed someone to look after his children. Despite Fanny's professed antipathy to second alliances, 'particularly if there is any family', she accepted him. She referred to his 'excellence of character', her own 'prospect of as much comfort as this

world can bestow' and her family's 'greatest satisfaction', but professed no warmer feelings. She was twenty-seven and, perhaps anxious that she would never find the perfect mate, settled for a thirty-nine-year-old widower. Aunt Jane's assessment of her niece's excellent judgement in matters of the heart may have been borne out by Fanny's behaviour in this case, maybe not. She gained a title and became Lady Knatchbull, but took on six step-children and produced nine more of her own.⁴

Successful proposal and acceptance scenes in the novels withdraw into third-person narrative, or near-silence as soon as the critical point is reached. The majority of Jane Austen's heroes exhibit a deep mistrust of fine words, but they also possess strong feelings. This is particularly applicable to Darcy and Mr Knightley, who both voice their unwillingness to make speeches – if they had felt less, they claim, they might have said more. There is no suggestion of elegant speeches rehearsed before a mirror – these proposals are spontaneous. Mr Knightley follows Emma into the garden with no idea of revealing the true state of his heart; it is described as 'the work of the moment' and the declaration that follows is the only proposal to be delivered in direct speech by the suitor himself. On this occasion, it is Emma who is temporarily tongue-tied. At the end of *Persuasion*, Captain Wentworth's feelings also flow unchecked, but this time in a letter which is, effectively, a proposal: 'I offer myself to you again with a heart even more your own, than when you broke it eight years and a half ago.'⁵ All he asks of Anne by way of response is a word or a look. Edmund Bertram's proposal is hardly in evidence at all – once he has decided that Fanny will do as a wife, he is 'very steadily earnest in pursuit of the blessing.'⁶ Edmund transfers his affections to Fanny in more time, granted, than Mr Collins takes in switching from Jane to Elizabeth, but his passions and inclinations are weaker than they were when Mary Crawford attracted him. He is on the rebound, and his anxiety to marry Fanny seems like an inevitable, worn-out kind of reaction. Fanny is a safe option: she is *not* Mary. Edward Ferrars' proposal is also sidestepped in a very determined fashion: 'in what manner he expressed himself, and how he was received, need not be particularly told.'⁷ He is agitated enough beforehand to hack a scissors case to bits and has to take himself off for a long walk in the village before he can make his intentions intelligible to Elinor.

Henry Tilney, with greater wit and eloquence, has more to say for himself on the walk between Fullerton Rectory and Mrs Allen's and he expresses himself so well that Catherine would have given anything to hear it all over again, but the reader, as usual, is left behind on the path, just out of earshot. The heroines themselves all avoid sentimental or agitated responses, no hysterics, no swooning, just a warm but considered acceptance: 'What did she say? – Just what she ought, of course. A lady always does.'⁸

Refusals, on the other hand, present the novelist with an opportunity for combative dialogue – nothing will ever be the same afterwards. Mr Elton's proposal to Emma, like Mr Darcy's first proposal to Elizabeth, is reported for the most part indirectly, but the ensuing exchange is given in glorious detail. Armed with the courage to blurt out his 'violent love' to Emma by a surfeit of Mr Weston's wine, Mr Elton declares extravagantly that he is 'ready to die' if she refuses to reward his ardent attachment and unequalled love and unexampled passion.⁹ Emma is forced to disabuse him in strong terms, since he will not see reason, leaving him in no doubt as to his position as a social inferior. Mr Collins' proposal speech is so obviously rehearsed that Elizabeth is unable to interrupt him until he reaches the point where he takes her acceptance as read. Mr Collins has had little to do with women and his ideas about the opposite sex have all been gleaned from Fordyce's *Sermons* and similar texts. Like Mr Elton, he has digested everything that conduct books have to say about 'elegant females' rejecting proposals out of a sense of modesty, while all the time meaning to accept. His comments on suspense find an echo in a letter written by the Revd John Gregory to his daughters in the 1770s, the entire collection of which ran to many editions in Jane Austen's lifetime: 'a state of suspense' it claimed, is a 'very great incitement to attachment, and (is) the food of love in both sexes.'¹⁰ He is so convinced by this argument, that an exasperated Elizabeth is forced to refuse him five times, in increasingly firm language, thus creating a powerful refutation of the view of women expressed in some conduct literature. She questions the existence of overly modest young ladies who would risk their future happiness by refusing a first proposal in the hope that a second attempt would follow. Women are rational creatures, she claims, who know their own inclinations and are capable of judging for themselves. When they say no, they mean no.

The absence of a clear negative was often interpreted as encouragement – but a woman's silence sometimes just gave her a breathing space before she did say no. Emma's initial speechlessness is taken as an auspicious sign by both of the men who propose to her, whereas she has no thought of accepting the first and every intention of saying yes to the second. Darcy certainly interprets Elizabeth's stunned response to his first proposal as an invitation to air his unconquerable, but not altogether gratifying, love for her. Convention requires him to express some anxious doubts about a favourable reply, although Elizabeth sees that he has no real qualms on that score. Her refusal is such a shock that he turns pale and has to struggle for composure. After her dismissal of Mr Collins, Elizabeth is still mistress of her own feelings, calmly determining her future plan of action, but the heated, highly charged exchange with Mr Darcy leaves her so mentally and physically exhausted that she collapses onto a chair to cry for half an hour. Her refusal has powerful consequences for both of them: Darcy is stung into a mortifying review of his ungentlemanly conduct and Elizabeth is forced to re-evaluate her unfounded prejudices. This is the beginning of a better knowledge of themselves and each other and from this point on they draw closer together.

Elizabeth Bennet is so splendid at handling refusals that Jane Austen cannot resist allowing her a third – a refusal in reverse. She refuses to promise that she will never become Darcy's wife, propelling Lady Catherine straight to London, to rehearse to her nephew all of his own previously held arguments against an alliance, together with Elizabeth's spirited resistance to her demands. Given Lady Catherine's celebrated candour, Darcy would feel the full force of Elizabeth's change of heart. Her final refusal has the most powerful consequence of all – it brings a hopeful Darcy back to Hertfordshire to make a second proposal of marriage.

Not every woman could expect Elizabeth's luck, but rejected suitors who were determined enough made multiple attempts to overcome disinclination. One particular clergyman, 'a plain Sensible man between thirty and forty years old with a pair of beautiful black Eyes to recommend a person otherwise not at All handsome', was refused seven times in one year by the woman he wished to marry, before she was prevailed upon to accept him. On the day of the marriage, by special licence in a private

house, the groom exacted his revenge – he disappeared on the afternoon before the wedding and failed to turn up for tea at 8 p.m. The whole city of Dublin was searched from end to end, but he could not be found. He finally arrived late for the ceremony, claiming that he had been shopping for gloves, 'but as he was a sensible little man, every one thought it was a piece of Satyrical Revenge on his long demurring Spouse.'¹¹ The story ends entertainingly enough, but the woman's extreme unwillingness sounds a darker note and brings Fanny Price sharply to mind. Perhaps the reluctant bride faced the same kind of coercion, her refusal interpreted as the result of inexperience and modesty. Her father, offended that she had not seen fit to consult him before making up her own mind, applying pressure by laying before her all of the advantages to herself and her family that a marriage to an eligible man would provide, impressing upon her that she may never receive another offer; the sanguine lover encouraged to persevere and allowed frequent access to her company, her resistance finally worn down and overcome, the power of refusal no power at all.

Emotional blackmail operated successfully in some instances. If the woman could be persuaded to believe that her refusal had resulted in the would-be lover's near-death, she might repent enough to change her mind. Dorothea Herbert was having none of it. She remained completely immune to a hot-headed lover, who penned long poems of undying love and followed her everywhere, wringing his hands and shedding tears. On receiving a very passionate letter from him, threatening desperate consequences should she continue to refuse him, she decided that his sentimental foolishness had gone quite far enough and passed the letter to her parents. He beat a hasty retreat, leaving Dorothea with some residual guilt, although news of his subsequent dealings soon restored her common sense:

I was quite Miserable at thus banishing him from his Eden – And my Conscience was never easy till I heard some Months after of his Marriage with a Miss Rolleston a Lady of large fortune – who besides got him good church Preferment being related to some Person in the Ministry – As I heard he was perfectly happy with his Choice – I thought myself quite exonerated from all further feeling on his Account.¹²

Helen Bourne's capacity for self-preservation was less developed than

Dorothea Herbert's. She rejected Thomas Martineau's desperate suit, then later agreed to allow him to write to her, because she felt sorry for him. She had learned of his poor physical and mental state, but she was also quite aware of her own susceptibility to human suffering and the danger to herself in agreeing to a correspondence:

I was indeed deeply grieved some weeks ago to hear of such unfavourable accounts of yr health – the idea seized my mind that perhaps it might in fact be occasioned by the disappointment of yr hopes respecting me – & I felt that if yr illness terminated as I then feared, from the accounts I heard, that I should never forgive myself; . . . [the] account of the state of yr mind interested & affected me & perhaps prepared me to receive more favourably than I should otherwise have done renewal of yr former proposals which the conviction of the depth & steadiness of yr attachment has aided materially – If I know my own heart it is warm & affectionate & unwilling to give pain to anyone.

How much I was distressed at refusing a compliance with yr wishes on a former occasion, but I believed then that you would soon forget me & find that happiness in some other connection which I had it not in my power to bestow – I did feel at that time that I was hardly doing you justice in not permitting a correspondence, as a means of attaining a more thorough knowledge of yr character; but I had been taught to consider it in the same light as an engagement, & I thought that if I consented to it & after some time perceived no change in my own feelings towards you, that it would be trifling with yr best affections, & using you ill –¹³

She was right to be wary of a prolonged correspondence, or any correspondence, since written communication between men and women with no formal engagement subsisting between them was not acceptable. Martineau took full advantage of her tender indecision and she was eventually prevailed upon to marry him.

Refusing an attractive offer of marriage on the advice of a friend or relative, for whatever reason, risked long-term unhappiness. Anne Elliot relinquishes her power of self-determination to Lady Russell in cancelling her engagement to Captain Wentworth. Her father and elder sister's proud disdain of Wentworth's lack of status also influences her decision; she is made to feel isolated and at fault. Her joy in life and her bloom fade and at twenty-seven, after eight years of silence and obscurity, her life appears closed down by her loss. She cannot escape her environment

nor her memories of Wentworth within it. The power of refusal, in effect exercised by others, almost puts an end to Anne Elliot's hopes and has the potential to push Wentworth into making an unsatisfactory match. Emma Woodhouse takes away Harriet Smith's right to accept Robert Martin and assumes the power to manipulate her into a match with Mr Elton. Harriet's confused silence enables Emma to introduce uncertainty into her mind:

'I lay it down as a general rule . . . that if a woman *doubts* as to whether she should accept a man or not, she certainly ought to refuse him. If she can hesitate as to 'Yes,' she ought to say 'No' directly.'¹⁴

How can poor scatty Harriet argue with such reasonable advice? Emma conveniently ignores the evidence of her friend's pre-Hartfield ease with the Martin family and the appeal of Robert Martin's character: he is good-natured, amiable and attached to Harriet, he writes creditable letters and he will suffer when he receives her rejection. If it were not for Emma's disapproval, Harriet would entertain no doubts about marrying him. Emma uses her position most unfairly and most dangerously – she does not consider the benefits of such a match for an illegitimate girl. She has no grasp of the stark reality of Harriet's uncertain position and despite her protestation of eternal friendship, she will not assume financial or emotional responsibility for her. Harriet may never receive another offer of marriage, despite her tractable nature and her pretiness. Mr Knightley's prediction of Harriet's impoverished future as the wife of the old writing master's son, when she might have gained a respectable farmer with good prospects and a comfortable house, is more realistic than Emma's ambitions for her protégé. As he points out, Emma has been no friend to Harriet Smith. She is driven to argue that '“it is always incomprehensible to a man that a woman should ever refuse an offer of marriage. A man always imagines a woman to be ready for anybody who asks her,”'¹⁵ and while her claim holds some truth, it does not apply to all men, all of the time.

Emma herself certainly imagines that Frank Churchill will find her refusal incomprehensible as she runs the scene of his proposal through her head. In the meantime, she is quite contented to enjoy his company with no

idea of a permanent attachment, fully aware that she is inviting speculation and gossip. Flirtation was just one aspect of initial attraction, of finding the right mate – it might lead to more serious courtship, it might lead nowhere, but society pronounced judgement on such behaviour if it produced no results. One of Jane Austen's Hampshire neighbours considered her a determined man-hunter after witnessing her willingness to stand up with anyone and everyone at the Basingstoke Assemblies. Women who were naturally high spirited and comfortable in men's company had to tolerate being labelled as flighty, or learn to curb their liveliness. This kind of flirting was not entirely safe, but it could be deliciously satisfying. Jane's cousin Eliza certainly thought so and admitted as much when she claimed that flirting made the blood circulate. Writing to inform Philadelphia Walter of her marriage, she couldn't resist slipping in a reference to an earlier *amour* with Phyllis's brother James:

I suppose he is much grown since I saw him; I do not think we should either of us know one another again, I fancy we are both a little altered since the time he made verses on me in which he compared me to Venus & I know not what other divinity, & played off fireworks in the cellar in honour of my charms.¹⁶

Eliza revelled in admiration of any sort, she liked to be fallen in love with, at the same time professing that she was not likely to lose sleep or appetite for any man breathing. Like Henry Crawford, she did not mean to be in any danger of falling in love. Starched cousin Phyllis commented on her 'dissipated' lifestyle in 1787, concluding, 'every woman is at heart a rake.'¹⁷ Eliza saw a good deal of Henry Austen at this time and was obviously taken by his appearance. She wrote to Phyllis of Henry's fashionable clothes and his imposing height. Both Henry and his elder brother James were fascinated by her and she must have been in her element. She and Henry planned to return to Paris together, but a place became vacant for him at St John's College, Oxford, which he could not defer. He was at this time seventeen, Eliza twenty-seven and married. A year later, she was still mentioning Henry in her letters to her cousin. In 1792, on the death of her mother, Eliza stayed with the Austens at Steventon for some time and Henry was still on the agenda, although the terms on which they existed were rather cool. Some kind of quarrel had been patched up, although it

seems to have been up to Henry to apologise – ‘and we are at present on very proper relationlike terms.’¹⁸ Henry became engaged to Mary Pearson early in 1796, but by the end of the year she had broken it off. The now widowed Eliza saw him in London at the beginning of November and wrote to Phyllis: ‘he looks thin & ill – I hear his late intended is a most intolerable Flirt, & reckoned to give herself great Airs’¹⁹ and this accusation from a woman who, in the previous paragraph, described the ‘reasonable quantity of Beaux’ she entertained each morning. James Austen was back on the scene too, his first wife having died in May 1795, but he had already given up thinking of Eliza as a second wife by the time she wrote to Phyllis in December: ‘I do not believe the parties ever will come together, not however that they have quarrelled, but one of them cannot bring her mind to give up dear Liberty, & yet dearer flirtation —’²⁰ She was not ready, she said, for ‘sober Matrimony’ with a parson, but Henry’s new militia appointment in 1797 meant that *he* might be in with a chance:

He is a very lucky young Man & bids fair to possess a considerable Share of Riches & Honours: I believe he has now given up all thoughts of the Church, and he is right for he certainly is not so fit for a Parson as a Soldier.²¹

That many readers and critics have drawn comparisons between Eliza and Mary Crawford is hardly surprising. In July 1797, in reply to Phyllis’s enquiries about her intentions regarding Henry, Eliza stated:

the Lady is so well pleased with her present situation that She cannot find it in her Heart to change it, and says in her giddy way that independence and the homage of half a dozen are preferable to subjection and the attachment of a single individual.²²

By September, despite all of her protestations to the contrary, Eliza left London for Lowestoft to be close to Henry and at the end of December, at the age of 35, she married him. Eliza’s habit of flirting, what she referred to as ‘trade’, became less overt, but she still had a keen eye for a good-looking man:

Capt. Tilson is remarkably handsome, and ... Messrs. Perrott & Edwardes may be chatted with very satisfactorily, but as to my Colonel Lord Charles Spencer, if I was married to my third husband instead of my second I should still be in love with him.²³

Acquiring a reputation as a jilt was something most women tried to avoid at all costs, but in facing the difficult task of finding a partner for life, mistakes were inevitably made. ‘A young Lady who would wish to engage the affections of a Man of merit, should never sport with his Happiness, by trifling with the Sex for diversion,’²⁴ stated one conduct manual, yet not all young women who changed their minds were Isabella Thorpes. Parson James Woodforde considered himself jilted by Betsy White of Shepton after she had broken a verbal agreement to marry him when his financial situation allowed. Fifteen months later, after seeing little of the parson, Betsy married a Devonshire man with a good income and expectations of property, who settled £300 per annum on her: ‘... she has proved herself to me a mere jilt’ complained Woodforde in his diary.²⁵ He believed she had given him up to marry a richer man, and he was probably right. Betsy had accepted a far better deal for herself than marrying, at some unspecified time in the future, a middle-aged clergyman on £400 a year, whose only recorded gifts to her were ripe peaches.

The Revd Thomas Gisborne, whose *Enquiry Into The Duties Of The Female Sex* Jane Austen had read and claimed to enjoy, took a more balanced view of the warm feelings a woman experienced when first singled out for special notice by a man:

She beholds him with general approbation: she is conscious that there is no other person whom she prefers to him: she receives lively pleasure from his attentions: and she imagines that she loves him with tenderness and ardour. Yet it is very possible that she maybe unacquainted with the real state of her heart. Thoughtless inexperience, gentleness of disposition, the quick susceptibility of early youth, and chiefly perhaps the complacency which all persons, whose affections are not pre-occupied, feel towards those who distinguish them by particular proofs of regard, may have excited an indistinct partiality which she mistakes for rivetted attachment.²⁶

Errors of judgement in matters of the heart were a painful fact of life, especially in a small, unvarying, country community, where choice was limited and the arrival of a prosperous or handsome stranger could challenge existing alliances. Anne Elliot recognizes as much when she hopes that Henrietta Musgrove will not keep Charles Hayter dangling if she has transferred her affections to Captain Wentworth. A distinction is made

here between a genuine change of heart and the deliberate raising of hopes in order to disappoint them; the love lives of two of Jane Austen's nieces provided her with enough evidence to draw on.

Her brother James' daughter, Anna, engaged herself at sixteen to the Revd Michael Terry, a man with good prospects, but almost twice her age. For some reason, her father and step-mother viewed the relationship with displeasure and packed Anna off to her Uncle Edward at Godmersham, where she arrived on 23 November 1809. In the early spring of the following year, after another interview with Michael Terry, James Austen agreed to the engagement. Mr Terry duly arrived at Godmersham on March the 2nd, and although Anna's cousin Fanny had reservations – 'He is much younger looking and more shy than I had an idea of. I should not like him, but if Anna does, that does not signify' – she altered her opinion in his favour on a closer acquaintance. By May the 4th, the affair was over, Anna luckily having realized in time that she had misunderstood her own inclinations. 'What a girl!!! ... Heavens! What will she do next?' recorded the astounded Fanny in her diary.²⁷ Unfortunately, the Terrys lived at Dummer, not far from Steventon, so it was thought politic to send Anna off to Chawton, where the immediate neighbourhood found plenty to gossip about, as her Aunt Jane soon discovered:

She does not return from Farringdon till this evening, – & I doubt not, has had plenty of the miscellaneous, unsettled sort of happiness which seems to suit her best. – We hear from Miss Benn, who was on the Common with the Prowings, that she was very much admired by the Gentlemen in general. —²⁸

A fairer interpretation of Anna's behaviour is provided by her daughter, Fanny-Caroline. She tells how the sixteen-year-old Anna lost her best friend and defender at home on her half-brother's removal to Winchester School:

Being lonely & unhappy probably my Mother fretted more under the snubbing & fault finding than she had ever done before & perhaps had more to bear as his parents could not but miss the boy, as much as she did, at all events she was wretched & thought her life unbearable and while still in this mood she received an offer of marriage. The Gentleman was a young clergyman, the son of a neighbouring squire, tall & good looking & well connected with certainty

of a comfortable family living if he did not already hold it. And she accepted him. I suppose because the warmth of the love & its sweet flatteries in contrast to the slighting & depreciation of home made her fancy that she did or could like the lover.²⁹

When, three years later, in August 1813, Anna suddenly sprang her engagement to Ben Lefroy of Ashe on the family, Jane wrote to her brother Frank, expressing the whole family's concern. Anna was still suspected of emotional instability and the match did not hold out much hope of companionable happiness: Ben had an odd temperament and hated company, Anna was giddy and gregarious. Her Aunt Jane predicted only a slim chance of happiness for the pair if the marriage went ahead,³⁰ but despite the family's belief that the relationship could not last, Anna proved them wrong and married Ben a year later, her 'unsteadiness' only surfacing now and again in what her aunt considered to be the acquisition of unnecessary luxuries – notably a piano and a purple pelisse, both purchased with wedding-present money meant for towels and sheets.

Anna's habit of circumventing family disapproval by being secretive did her no favours with Aunt Jane; it certainly seems that she was more severely judged than Fanny Knight, who at sixteen was expressing her opinion of Anna's behaviour in exclamatory terms, at eighteen earning a reproof from Aunt Cassandra for idolizing the impossibly handsome George Hatton³¹ and playing fast and loose with John Plumtre's affections at twenty-one. She encouraged him to a point where a proposal seemed imminent, then wrote in a panic to Aunt Jane about her rapidly cooling feelings for him. Jane had seen enough of the relationship to be an understanding judge of Fanny's feelings – 'Your mistake has been one that thousands of women fall into. He was the first young Man who attached himself to you. That was the charm, & most powerful it is.'³² Just how flattering such attentions can be she explores in *Emma*, the novel she was working on at the time of Fanny's dilemma. 'I was tempted by his attentions, and allowed myself to appear pleased.' Emma explains to Mr Knightley, regarding her flirtation with Frank Churchill. 'An old story, probably – a common case – and no more than has happened to hundreds of my sex before; ...'³³

Jane Austen recognized the transitory nature of affection and in Fanny's case found it both serious and amusing: by all accounts, it was better

to appear fickle than face a lifetime of misery committed to a loveless match.³⁴ Fanny recovered sufficiently from her worries to flirt openly with her Uncle Henry's surgeon, Mr Haden, a year later and Jane described to Cassandra how animated the pair were one evening in Henry's drawing room, sitting so close together that she could not be sure whether they occupied a chair each or were sharing the same one. Another year on and Fanny's fickleness flared up again, when John Plumtre became attached to someone else and Aunt Jane had to deliver a dose of strong medicine: Fanny was not in love with him, she never had been and now she must accept that he had transferred his affections to another woman.³⁵ In the same letter, James Wildman featured as a potential suitor and Fanny's 'fluctuations of . . . Fancy' and 'Caprizios of . . . Taste' left Jane Austen reeling in admiration. Fanny's appeal lay in her openness; this is what excused her – but no wonder she pretended that she couldn't find the letters her aunt had written to her, when her cousin James-Edward Austen-Leigh asked for material in the 1860s for his *Memoir*. The grand Lady Knatchbull that Fanny had become, with an unsteadier character in her younger days than her cousin Anna had ever exhibited, now had a solid Victorian reputation to protect.

Jane Austen herself refused one proposal of marriage, in December 1802, just before her twenty-seventh birthday. Jane and Cassandra were staying with their old friends Catherine and Althea Bigg at Manydown Park near Basingstoke, when the Biggs' twenty-one-year old brother Harris asked Jane to marry him. He was plain and his awkwardness was heightened by a pronounced stutter, so presumably his proposal was as brief and to the point as he could manage. He apparently had little to recommend him beyond his size, his prospective property and his fortune, but Jane accepted him, then reconsidered overnight and said no the following morning. She did not love him and knew that 'the place & fortune which would certainly be *his*, could not alter the *man*'. She would not put her trust in finding love after marriage.³⁶ The advantages of the match to her family and to herself would have been considerable – here was a ready-made, familiar home and family for Cassandra and Mrs Austen when Mr Austen died, Jane would move out of Bath back to her beloved Hampshire, financial security was guaranteed and her brothers would be spared the future expense of

supporting their mother and sisters. Her refusal was momentous; James' wife Mary – and probably other members of the Austen family too – were not best pleased and the two remaining Bigg sisters must have been disappointed that Jane would not be the future mistress of Manydown Park, securing their own place in it should neither of them marry. The whole affair caused much embarrassment and Jane and Cassandra cut their visit short, returning in haste to Bath, but the sisters at Manydown remained their firm friends and Harris married someone else two years later.

It is likely that Edward Bridges proposed marriage to Jane Austen three years later, or came very close to it, and that his mother Lady Bridges knew about it. Jane was staying at Goodnestone Farm in August 1805, when she was twenty-nine and Edward a twenty-six-year-old clergyman. They had known each other for nine years at least. In September 1796, while Jane was staying at Rowling, Edward Bridges chose her as his partner to open the ball at Goodnestone Hall. His interest manifested itself again in 1805, in his ordering toasted cheese especially for her one evening after a cricket match. Jane did not mention a proposal in her letters, it is something she would want to discuss with Cassandra face to face, but she either refused him or skilfully turned the conversation when she saw where it was leading. In the following letter three days later, it becomes clear that she was avoiding Edward's company. She stated that she could give no convincing reason for leaving Goodnestone before Monday, but since Edward had engagements which would take him away from home over the weekend, she might just as well stay.³⁷ Like Emma Woodhouse wishing to prevent Frank Churchill from making 'an absolute declaration', which could only lead to a painful conclusion, she did not wish to jeopardize a friendship. Rejection was inescapably embarrassing and few women wished to inflict pain or humiliation on men who had perhaps become their friends over the course of time, especially if that friendship had been interpreted as something more. Three years later, another reference to Edward and his mother appears to point to some kind of past experience which might have caused them to behave coolly towards her. She had seen neither Edward nor Lady Bridges since 1805 and felt uncomfortable about encountering them on this occasion, but all seemed to have been forgiven. Lady Bridges was her usual, friendly, smiling self and although there had been little

opportunity for talking at any length, she and her son had given Jane the impression that their goodwill towards her was unaltered.³⁸ The final reference to the affair comes in a letter to Cassandra, who was staying at Godmersham in October 1808: 'I wish you may be able to accept Lady Bridges' invitation, tho' I could not her son Edward's.'³⁹ The following year, Edward Bridges married Harriet Foote, none the worse for being turned down by Jane Austen.

It is too universal a maxim with novelists, that love is felt but once; though it appears to me, that the heart which is capable of receiving an impression at all, and can distinguish, will turn to a new object when the first is found unworthy,⁴⁰

noted Mary Wollstonecraft, but it was no universal maxim for Jane Austen, either in fiction or real life. 'I suppose he has quick feelings —' she said of one dismissed suitor, 'but I dare say they will not kill him'⁴¹ and her conviction that disappointment in love never killed anybody is carried through into her fiction. Despite the 'indelible' impression that Edmund Bertram's blighted hopes leave on his mind, it only takes from early spring until the end of the summer to cure his 'unconquerable passions' and effect 'the transfer of unchanging attachment'. Sitting around under trees all summer, talking confidentially with Fanny, Edmund on the rebound comes to value her character over Mary's.⁴² Had Edmund married Mary Crawford, however, Jane Austen makes it clear that Fanny would have overcome her disappointment and married Henry. Captain Benwick is not likely to die of disappointment, either, however much he wishes others to think that he might. He deliberately feeds his loss by dwelling on poetry 'which imaged a broken heart, or a mind destroyed by wretchedness', yet Anne Elliot divines that 'He will rally again, and be happy with another', and that this is how it should be.⁴³ Charles Musgrove marries Mary Elliot when he can't have Anne and in Anne's own case, after eight long years of disappointed hope and Wentworth now seemingly unattainable, she does not immediately discount the possibility of a relationship with James Benwick or Mr Elliot. Mr Elton disappears to Bath to find himself a wife within days of Emma's refusal of his proposal. He has no lasting feelings of disappointment, but his animosity towards both Emma and Harriet has inescapable consequences in such a narrow society. Emma must witness

the effects of her meddling on an almost daily basis and it takes some time to persuade the deluded Harriet to cease dwelling on Mr Elton's perfusions, her mournful preoccupation centred almost entirely on a piece of court plaster and a pencil stub. Remedies for disappointed love 'must vary much as to time in different people', but Jane Austen's message is always the same, that time will effect its cure in every case.